

Humour in Meetings: A Case Study of Power in the Malaysian Academic Context

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ABSTRACT

The conceptualisation of humour as a means of communication is not new (Martineau, 1972, p. 101). Research on the social functions of humour has contributed valuable information not only on the positive psychological effect of humour, but also on the understanding of social interaction patterns and the dynamics of group structure (Martineau, 1972, p. 103). Studies from the West have indicated that humour is highly recognised as a powerful discourse to be used to wield power in workplace setting (Sollit-Morris, 1997; Holmes & Marra, 2002a; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Arfeen, 2009). This study investigates the functions of humour and the enactment of power amongst academics in asymmetrical relations. The parameters of this study are confined to the different status position of the participants who use humour to wield power during academic management meetings. Data for the study were collected from semi-formal meetings that were recorded in a local university in the state of Terengganu. The instances of humour elicited from the naturally-occurring discourse of the academic staff were categorised based on Hay's Taxonomy of Functions of Humour (1995), which mainly focuses on power in discourse. The findings revealed that the production of humour in academic management meetings is highly influenced by the status or position that one occupies.

Keywords: Humour, power, academic management meetings, workplace discourse, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the functions of humour and the enactment of power by academicians of different status positions in semi-formal meetings. For the purpose of this study, the definition put forth by

Martineau (1972) is referred to identify the instances of humour while the theoretical framework of the study refers to Hay's function of humour taxonomy.

Humour is recognised as utterances that make the audience laugh. Martineau (1972, p. 114) states that "Humo[u]r is conceived generically to be any communicative instance which is perceived as humo[u]rous by any of the interacting parties." It has been recognised as an effective communication device that helps lighten the atmosphere (Miller, 1967; O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981; Lynch, 2010). Its ability to amuse is widely known and its usefulness leads to several positive functions, especially in mental and emotional relief (Spencer, 1960; Moran & Massam, 1997).

Humour is pervasive, thus, it is employed in most settings such as at hospitals (Cosser, 1960), in schools (Powell & Andersen, 1985) and at workplaces (Taylor & Bain, 2003; Holmes, 2000a; Holmes, 2000b) to name a few. In a general setting where the situation is tense, humour can be a cure to alleviate stress, provide mental break and control the situation. Humour is also found to be useful in increasing attentiveness and acts as a communication tool between teachers and students (Powell & Andersen, 1985), as well as a 'survival' strategy to facilitate and overcome problems in teaching and learning (Woods, 1983).

In the workplace setting, humour is broadly used as a source to foster solidarity, fulfil free time and an ice breaker among people in different hierarchies (Holmes, 2000b), which Fairclough (2001, p. 36)

describes as unequal encounters. According to Fairclough (2001), an unequal encounter refers to interaction between non-powerful people with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds with powerful people of higher status (Fairclough, 2001, p. 40).

Yet, apart from the positive functions, humour also possesses negative functions that are often deemed to disrupt the flow of work, slow down productivity and waste time (Porcu, 2005). In a workplace setting, humour can function as a boundary marker that is covertly used to assign colleagues who conform or deviate from shared social norms. Humour can be a double-edged sword where it functions to involve or stray participants from 'in group' members during discussions.

Revell (2007), who investigated functions of humour in business meetings, discovered that humour fosters solidarity among participants who constructed collaborative humour with converging speech styles. Meanwhile, speakers whose speech style is divergent from the 'in group' members were segregated from the team through humour. Revell's study concluded that humour not only signalled solidarity but also collusion, especially among those who have different shared norms.

Besides, humour can be employed to control over certain individual or group members' behaviour. In the workplace context, for instance, humour is used to perform directives whereby the superior tends to control the behaviour of his/ her subordinates and also to gain compliance (Holmes & Marra, 2002b). As such, conflict

may arise if there is opposition from subordinate. This demonstrates the negative functions of humour where it is used to control, thus, creating conflict and causing tension in situations involving social stratification. Discourse strategies used to express the conflict function of humour include irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature and parody (Stephenson, 1951).

At this juncture, the use of humour is seen to be effective in fulfilling various communicative goals. However, humour is also paradoxical and incongruent, for the challenge lies with the ability to comprehend the underlying implicit message. This is because failure to notice the speaker's intended meaning or misinterpreting the message leads to hearer being offensive. Thus, a basic knowledge of how humour functions will help interlocutors identify the intended meaning behind the humour directed to them.

The definition put forth by Martineau (1972, p. 114) is used to identify the instances of humour: "*Humo[u]r is conceived generically to be any communicative instance which is perceived as humo[u]rous by any interacting parties*". In other words, humour in this study is recognised as utterances that make the audience laugh. The intention of speakers to appear humorous is identified based on the context (Hay, 1995) in order to support the funniness of the utterances. According to Lynch (2005), understanding social context aids in comprehending humour since to understand humour, one has to be familiar with the social

contexts, which in this case are academic meetings. Hay (1995), in her study, develops a taxonomy that characterizes the functions of humour based on interactions between close friends. This framework assumes that every attempt at humour is an attempt to both express solidarity with the audience and construct a position of respect and status within the group (Hay, 1995, p. 97). The framework is deemed suitable for this study, which focuses on workplace setting for the following reasons:

- a. the taxonomy covers the functions of power which is the main concepts intended to be examined in the present study;
- b. the taxonomy provides a clear-cut view for the researcher to identify the functions of humour; and
- c. instances of humour in the present study subsume "inside jokes", which are jokes that only group members with a shared background knowledge understand (Norrick, 1993, p. 6). This is seen to be similar with the interpretation of the data from Hay (1995).

The instances of humour were categorised using Hay's Taxonomy of Functions of Humour (1995) that focuses on power. The analyses of the data in this study were also drawn on the work of Holmes (2000a) and Holmes and Marra (2002b) on subversive and repressive humour, which is essential in examining the manifestation of power in asymmetrical and symmetrical relationship at the workplace.

Hay's Functions of Humour (1995)

The first function identified by Hay is power and its functions are divided into four; namely 'conflict', 'control', 'bound' and 'tease'. Solidarity functions are also categorised into four which are 'to share', 'to highlight similarities or capitalise on shared meanings', 'to clarify and maintain boundaries' and 'to tease'. Lastly, the psychological category subsumes the functions 'to defend' and 'to cope'.

Hay uses the label "P" for humour which increases or reinforces the speaker's power and "S" for humour which maintains solidarity among speakers and interlocutors. An instance of humour is not restricted to only one type and can be dwelled into several functions all at once (ibid.:99).

In relation with the current study, the classification of the functions of humour will be limited to power functions only, as the main purpose of this study is to investigate power embedded in humour in academic settings.

Power

Humour that serves power functions is branched into four, as follows: fostering conflict, to control, to challenge and set boundaries and to tease by attacking or criticising in order to increase or maintain speakers' power.

a. Fostering Conflict

The type of humour in this category initiates or creates conflict among group members. Belittling, demeaning and uttering

aggressive messages are classified in this category.

b. To Control

Instances of humour which fall into control functions are humour that intends to influence the behaviour of the audience. Humour in this category is expected to arise in a workplace or in a situation which involves power differences among speakers. Hay (1995) states that most examples that demonstrate the attempt to dominate and influence the behaviour of the audience comes from boundP type of humour.

c. To Challenge and Set Boundaries (boundP)

According to Hay (2000, p. 107), humour can challenge existing boundaries, attempt to set new ones, create or maintain boundaries by making an example of someone present. As mentioned earlier in the clarifying and maintaining boundaries (boundS) function; humour in this category clarifies boundaries to exclude outsiders and those who deviate from social norms and shared values (Hay, 1995).

d. To Tease (P)

Teasing is associated with power when it is utilised to make a criticism for the purpose of attacking interlocutors. Commonly, teasing overlaps with the boundary category. The speaker who teases by manifesting power intends to maintain or increase his/her power in a conversation.

Repressive and Subversive Humour

Generally, past studies distinguished two types of humour that demonstrated power play among colleagues in asymmetrical and symmetrical interactions among colleagues (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Marra, 2007). The two types of humour, which function as tools to enact power in hierarchical context, are repressive and subversive humour.

According to Holmes (2000a), repressive humour, which is also known as coercive humour, is directed downward by one who is superior in ranking to those who are subordinates so as to reduce the face threat of a directive, challenge or criticism. By applying this type of humour, the superior appears less authoritarian while performing directives and acceptable since the superiors 'do power' is less explicit to reduce the emphasis on power differences. Hence, the relationship among people of different hierarchies is maintained since repressive humour reduces the possibilities of conflict because of the hedging effect it has.

While repressive humour is used to repress subordinates, subversive humour is a strategy employed by the subordinates to implicitly convey negative or critical message to their superiors. This way, the subordinates appear less defiant or rebellious in expressing disagreement. Holmes claimed that this type of humour is not so much a politeness device that attends to participants' positive or negative face needs, nor a repressive discourse device that disguises an underlying power relationship; instead, it functions as a critical

discourse device to challenge the existing authority structures (Holmes, 2000a, p. 177). Subversive humour provides the idea that power fluctuates and is not only exercised by people in the higher hierarchy but also by those people who are powerless.

WHY MEETINGS?

In many organisations, a meeting is a tool of communication to gather information for monitoring progress, reviewing organisation's work, setting plans and budgets and deciding matters related to policy (Jasnawati Jasmin, 2008), and it is proven that meetings contribute largely to the accomplishment of workplace objectives.

Meetings are also means for enacting and managing institutional power and relationship (Holmes & Marra, 2003). Sollit-Morris (1997, p. 82) stated that influence can be carried out by any person who is present in the meeting and does not restrict influence to those with authorised or a higher social status. Therefore, everyone has the opportunity to 'do power' by opposing opinions of others or standing up to present their views.

Generally, meetings are grouped into two categories. Boden (1994, as cited in Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009) distinguished the characteristics of formal and informal meetings. A formal meeting involves a large number of participants, a chairperson who allocates turns to the participants and fixes goals to be accomplished; meanwhile in an informal meeting, the conversational style is more casual and turns are self-selected (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009).

Meetings were chosen in this study as they represented a natural setting in a specific workplace to be observed. Past research on humour which employed dependent measurement by rating laughter, jokes or cartoons (O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981, p. 350) has provided insufficient information on the linguistic aspects of humour. Besides, conventional methods such as questionnaires and interviews only provide general findings on humour without examining any real conversational data (Norrick, 1993); thus, they may not be adequate to describe the role of humour. Norrick further claimed that various forms of humour are best understood by explaining its integration in natural conversational contexts to shed light on the structure and point of both conversation and humour.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The data gathered for this study were obtained from four academic management meetings in an academic institution in the state of Terengganu in Malaysia. The meetings were audio-recorded unobtrusively in order to depict a natural flow of discourse and to allow the most natural behaviour of the participants in the discussions. A total duration of 382 minutes of natural occurring talk was recorded. The academic staff conversed primarily in English, but occasionally, they code-switched to Malay.

The researcher gained permission from the Dean of NAS to record the meetings and the consent form was approved by the Head of Department. Since the Dean and the Head of the Department had the power and

authorisation over the participants, seeking permission from all the participants was seen as not necessary.

At the first meeting, the chairperson informed all of the participants that they were being recorded for research purposes. However, there were some participants who came in late for the meetings who were unaware of the purpose of recording the meetings. Once the meeting ended, the researcher informed the late comers that they had been recorded and the purpose for the recording was also noted.

The learning institution, the faculty, the names of the participants, codes of subjects, and names of students involved in the study have been changed. Instead, pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the data and the setting.

All the four meetings were transcribed using transcription notation from Jefferson (1978) and Jariah Mohd Jan (1999). The transcription presented the distribution of turns between speakers, occurrences of simultaneous speech, interruptions and the point when a previous speaker ceases to talk in relation to the next speaker's turn (Jariah Mohd Jan, 1999, p. 226).

All the meetings, with the exception of one, involving more than 10 participants were recorded. Consequently, not all utterances were intelligible for them to be transcribed as in the case when more than three speakers were talking all at the same time during the discussions. Thus, these aspects caused certain difficulties to the researcher to identify and transcribe the overlapping utterances. As such, these

sections were not transcribed. Nevertheless, for most parts, the utterances that were crucial and related to the current study were analyzable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data revealed that **25 percent** of the recording contains instances of humour that illustrate power wielding between academics in the management meetings.

The elicited instances of humour were categorised into four functions based on Hay's (1995) taxonomy, with the exception of the solidarity and psychological functions. These functions were excluded since this study only focused on the aspect of power. Table 1 presents the tabulation of the occurrences of humour compiled from the recordings of the meetings with a total duration of 382 minutes.

TABLE 1
Functions of Humour that Illustrate Power according to Hay's Taxonomy (1995)

Power	N (%)
Tease	17 (36.17%)
Control	15 (31.91%)
Bound	10 (21.28%)
Conflict	5 (10.64%)
Total	47 (25%)

Table 1 presents the functions of humour that display authority produced in the respective meetings among the academicians. For the power category, teasing received the highest percentage (36.17%), while conflict occurred the least (10.64%) in all of the four meetings recorded.

Power

There is approximately 25 percent of humour used to boost power in the four meetings recorded. In particular, subversive and repressive humour was found utilised through the use of four functions of humour with the purpose of enacting power. The next section presents examples from the data for each of the functions of humour in relation to power, namely, tease, control, bound and conflict.

a. Tease

The occurrence of humour that functions to tease interlocutors in tandem with the assertion of power in all meetings recorded is 36.17 percent. Teasing received the highest percentage of humour in relation to exerting power. The data suggested that teasing, manifested with power, overlaps with boundary functions since it excludes those who deviate from shared opinions. Teasing which boosts speakers' power was also found by Hay (1995) in her study of gender and humour.

Example 1

Meeting 1: MM asks SL about the prizes for the best facilitator award of the TESL camp.

[...]

[1178] SM: so faci award should be / SL / ES and / AN cannot be in that committee right/ so sixteen thirteen only / because you're the leader/ leader cannot

- [1179] SL: it doesn't say
 [1180] SM: normally leader (cannot)
 @ (all laugh)
 [1181] MM: *apa yang dapat pun?*
 (what will we get?)
 [1182] SM: ha::: *dapat i pad*
 (get)
 [1183] SL: (i pack)
 @ (all laugh)

In Meeting 1, SL is the only senior lecturer, while SM and MM are junior colleagues. In Example 1, lines [1182-1183] present an instance of teasing with assertion of power by SL that is directed towards SM. In line [1178], MM initiates a sceptical comment about the prize that is provided for the winner of the best facilitator. Prior to the segment analysed, MM mentioned the *ipad* during the meeting and SM brings it up once again [line 1182] for the purpose of **ridiculing** MM. SL, who takes the turn just after SM's contribution, gains laughter from the team members with his comment directed towards SM. SL mimics the word *ipack* [line 1183] to appear amusing and also to criticise SM.

The participants laughed conspiratorially – which builds solidarity among them. However, the laughter also presents a form of authority enacted by SL. SL, who was previously **excluded** from the discussion group (see Example 1, lines [1178-1180]), re-asserts her power to gain control over the meeting. She (SL) is challenged by SM who states that leaders cannot be nominated for the best facilitator award for the TESL camp. The teasing towards SM indirectly puts SL in a position of power during the discussion.

b. Control

The occurrence of humour that functions to control the behaviour of the participants in the recordings of the total meetings was 31.91 percent, as illustrated in Table 1. The data suggested that humour in this category was commonly employed by one who is superior in ranking to his/ her subordinates, which is in tandem with Sollit-Morris' (1997), Holmes' (2000b) and Arfeen's (2009) findings.

Example 2

Meeting 1: SL explains the duty- time slot she has allocated for every facilitator involved in the TESL camp.

- [...]
 [380] SM: oh / i'm six / (of course
 the leader / only one /
 extra
 @ (SL smiles)
 [381] SL: *ni / <i'm six / MM's
 seven>*
 (this)
 @ <points to the
 schedule>
 [382] SM: (oh okay)
 @ (SL laughs)
 [383] SL: okay / okay /
 motivational talk / er /
 why i put you there you
 SM / because / because
 of merit demerit / and
 then / <just to fill
 In your six times>
 @ <laughs>

In Example 2, lines [380-383], the chairperson, SL, who is of a higher rank

in this context and also one of the leaders of the TESL camp project, is seen to exert her power to SM, which compels him to conform to her instructions. The smiles and laughter by SL (in lines 380 – 382) softens the demand she had made on SM and also to gain compliance so that he performs the task. In this particular instance, the use of laughter can be interpreted as a strategy by a superior to make a subordinate conform to the task she has assigned. It is used to soften the demand and is directed by a superior (SL) to a subordinate (SM) to ensure that SM conforms to SL's order. At the same time, SL appears less demanding by producing laughter, while performing directives to a person who is of a lower rank. The intention is to control the behaviour of a lower ranked academic staff. This is an instance of repressive humour as it minimises the face threatening act and softens speech acts such as directives and criticisms (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

c. Bound

The occurrence of humour that functions to create boundaries for those who have deviated from the social norms and shared values in the meetings recorded is 21.28 percent. It is found that with this type of humour, power fluctuates where it can be enacted by people regardless of the status they hold in a hierarchical environment.

Example 3

Meeting 3: AN asks whether the team needs an additional facilitator for the trip to the Syahbandar Esplanade Park.

[...]

[689] ES: one more / one more

[690] AN: so we need one more location?

[691] SL: no faci

[692] ZN: faci faci

[693] MM: okay (thank you AN) / oh the camera man can <follow>

@ (all laugh)

@ <looks at the researcher>

[694] AN: it's the camera (woman) @ (all laugh)

In Example 3, ES, AN and SL are senior lecturers, while MM and ZN are junior colleagues. Lines [689-694] present an evidence of how humour clarifies boundaries on a particular person who is perceived to have deviated from the on-going discussion. In line [690], AN misunderstands the information provided by the team members and thinks that ES is asking for one more facilitator for the trip to the Syahbandar Esplanade Park. AN's turn that appears as an offer to help contribute ideas for the trip [line 690] is consequently **ridiculed** by MM since he has posed a wrong question. Further, MM who sits beside AN directs an ironic *thank you* to AN [line 693], which in fact indicates a contrast to what he really means. The comment by MM invites chuckles and great laughter from the participants. Hence, the laughter creates a boundary between

AN and the other members because he has deviated from the discussion.

It is noted that the ironic remark produced by MM is an evidence of subversive humour [line 693]. Subversive humour is a type of humour which is directed by a subordinate to challenge and make a criticism levelled at colleagues who are of a higher rank. In this case, MM produces a humorous contribution to challenge AN's status in the meeting.

In line [694], AN, who has previously been ridiculed by MM and the participants, further initiates a contribution that acts as an effective strategy to challenge MM's attack on him. AN reasserts his power and control in the conversation by repairing MM's contribution who mistakenly refers to the researcher as a camera man. This presents AN's contribution to be perceived as humorous by the team members and it produces laughter from them.

The humour produced by AN boosts his power and creates a boundary between MM and the team members. This example shows evidence that power fluctuates and can be exercised to regain status and control over the conversation through the use of humour (Fairclough, 2001; Jariah Mohd. Jan, 2003).

d. Conflict

According to Hay (1995), humour in this category tends to create conflict between the speakers and interlocutors. The occurrence of conflict humour is 10.64 percent and it was found to be the least popular type of humour produced by the academicians. In particular, this type of humour was commonly directed

by colleagues in symmetrical relationship who also hold similar positions in the department.

Example 4

Meeting 2: The participants are discussing the answer written by a student in a particular exam as to whether the answer is acceptable or irrelevant.

[...]

[247] AN: i was active in sport both in school and in the university / in my School, i was selected as the head prefect in my final year / i was also the president of the girl's guide association

[248] ML: not relevant

[249] AN: but in the university i was the president of the tennis bla bla bla / i think it's perfect

[250] ML: no:::

[251] AN: because it's school / and then it's university / it talks about the experience

[252] ML: (...)

[253] TP: but it's not sports / because prefect / <prefect> / (...) / half a mark / @ <shakes head>

[254] AN: <kesian?>

(pity?)

@ <looks at TP>

- [255] TP: yeah (<*kesian*>) / yeah
 half / half
 (pity)
 @ <laughs>
 @ (all laugh)
 [256] ML: (for writing)
 @ (all laugh)
 [257] NZ: yeah

All the interlocutors in this excerpt (namely, AN, ML, TP and NZ) are senior lecturers. In Example 4, lines [247-257] show an instance of humour that has the potential to initiate a conflict between AN and the other participants. In line [247], AN attempts to defend the answer provided by his student and tries to convince the rest that the student's response is acceptable and related to the answer scheme. However, all the team members disagree and claim that the answer is irrelevant.

ML, who is a PhD holder, interrupts AN by firmly stating that the answer is irrelevant [line 248]. ML's opinion is supported by TP who comes to the decision that the answer is worth only half a mark, not because of the content but because the student has put some effort to write the answer [line 256]. Besides, the lexical item *kesian* (pity) [line 252-253] indicated is directed mockingly towards the particular student and provokes laughter from the team members.

TP and ML, who are senior lecturers just like AN, are exercising their power to challenge AN's opinion. The laughter from the colleagues is a response indicating that TP and ML's opinions are strongly supported by the participants. It is apparent that the laughter initiated by the team

members could lead to a conflict because of contradictions in opinions. AN was laughed at by his colleagues, indicating that he is being belittled.

The occurrence of laughter is also categorised into the boundary function, which divides AN from the social group because he has deviated from the agreed decision. As Hay (1995) stated, an instance of boundary humour that is exercised with power excludes those who deviate from social norms and shared values. This example illustrates that AN is excluded from the group and that is how conflict can be initiated.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that humour, manifested with power, has numerous functions. These functions included teasing team members, controlling the behaviour of the participants, creating boundaries for those straying away from the discussion during the course of the meeting and initiating conflict among the speakers and the interlocutors.

It was observed that repressive humour was used by the superiors while issuing directives or passing criticisms to the junior participants. It was utilised to signal mistakes of others and to control their contributions during the meetings. Through repressive humour, the team members of the higher ranking gain compliance by getting other participants to agree with their views and conform to their instructions. The use of repressive humour also helps to tone down directives thus minimising the face

threatening acts of the interlocutor. By applying this type of humour, the senior participants appear less authoritative while performing directives since the enactment of power play is less explicit. Thus, the researcher asserts that the use of repressive humour by the senior academicians in the Malaysian academic context functions primarily to maintain positive relationships with their colleagues.

Meanwhile, the junior staff in this study use subversive humour to implicitly oppose those of higher authority and also challenge those who deviate from the discussions. In other words, it helps them to implicitly reduce the power and dominance of the senior staff in the meetings. Subversive humour provides the idea that power fluctuates and it is also exercised by people with less power.

Although humour was not found to be employed at all times during the meetings (note that the findings indicated only 25 percent humour was used in the four meetings recorded), it is perceived as one of the components of workplace discourse that can be used to challenge a person's status in the Malaysian workplace context.

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